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ABSTRACT

Because of her unfamiliarity with the culture, an experienced creative writing instructor in her first year of teaching on the big island of Hawaii decided to use the standard writing workshop model. The University of Hawaii Hilo draws a diverse mix of students, returning students, and local students who speak Creole. Some students were uncertain if their dialect was appropriate for the classroom, some were taught not to speak until spoken to, some do not relate to the idea of the individual taking responsibility for the creative work they do, and some from oral cultures were suspicious of writing. The language of many of the local students was infused with metaphor, local language, and poetry. The richness of their language sometimes makes it difficult as a reader to know whether a given piece of writing counts as creative writing. The instructor conducted a pilot study in which members of the English department and creative writing and advanced composition students responded to questions concerning the line between creative writing and expository writing. Faculty members defined the distinctions between the two types of writing and offered no metaphors for the distinction. Students were less genteel in their definitions but offered many metaphors. As classrooms become more culturally diverse, educators can no longer make assumptions about what is being said, heard, or written. (RS)

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Come Talk Story: A Creative Writing Workshop in Hawai'i

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In my talk today, I want to examine two issues that may help to explain why the traditional workshop method of teaching creative writing is often problematic in the multicultural environment in which many of us find ourselves teaching. The first issue I want to explore is how multicultural communication is communication between systems that are often at cross pruposes. The second issue I'd like to examine is definitional and explores the blurry boundary between what is usually called creative writing and what is usually referred to as expository writing. By examining these two issues, I hope to enter into the dialogue about creative writing and the way that we teach it.

This has been my first year teaching on the Big Island of Hawaii. As an experienced creative writing instructor, I was somewhat disconcerted to find myself in a culture that is different from any culture I have previously known. Our campus of the University of Hawaii draws a diverse mix of students: local Hawaiians and Hawaiians from other islands; first or second generation students from various Pacific Rim countries, including Micronesia, Samoa, China, Japan, and the Philippines; and Anglo students, some of whom grew up in Hawaii and some of whom are from other states. All of these groups include returning students, as well as those just out of high school. Many of the local students are creole speakers who have been brought up with a sense of linguistic insecurity.

Because of my unfamiliarity with this new culture, I decided that the best way to teach the creative writing workshop would be

to use the standard model in which I had been taught when I was an undergraduate in the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop. Using this model meant that my students chose their own genre--poetry, fiction or drama--and then wrote whatever they wished in that genre. It meant that they brought their work in to be photocopied three days before the class met, and that during the class meetings students sat in a circle and talked about each other's work. I always said something about each piece after all the others had spoken, and handed back the students' work with my written comments. Sometimes the students asked for an assignment at the end of the two hour class, and I would usually give one, though doing the assignment was always optional.

I noticed early on that some students were uncomfortable. It was not clear at first whether this discomfort was because some students were uneasy with what they perceived was required of them to produce what they thought would be acceptable creative writing. For example, one or two of the students spoke creole among themselves while waiting for class to begin, and it seemed to me to be their belief that their natural dialect was probably not acceptable for school purposes. This belief, I have come to see, can produce students who come to the creative writing classroom anxious and angry. For example, when a local student named Lokahi first came to my Creative Writing class, he sat outside the circle the students had made. When he introduced himself, he said he wasn't sure he would stay because he might be too anxious to share his work. Lokahi did stay, and produced poetry reminiscent of Vietnam protest poetry of the 60s--political poetry aimed at

raising consciousness about the Hawaiian sovereignty movement using language that he believes gives power to his people. But when his friend Linda thought about joining the creative writing class, she decided against it. She explained that for her all langauge is political and she sensed that her anger at those in the class who would use language in a different way than she did would not let her interact in a positive way with the students in class who did not share her political beliefs.

Political issues are not the only ones that have prevented students from feeling they could succeed in the creative writing workshop. Because there has, at some point in their school lives, been much shame and confusion about what counts as English, it is not easy for many local students to dare to try their hand at creative writing. I noticed that the traditional workshop model of focusing on the students' written work and critiquing that work in the round is threatening to many Hawaiian students in several ways. Besides their uncertainty with dialect, other language issues come into play, too. For example, Micronesian students are taught not to look directly at the teacher and not to speak until spoken to directly. Many of the other local students do not relate to the idea of the individual taking the responsibility and the glory for the creative work they do. Rather, it is the group that counts, and individual needs become secondary to those of the group.

When Kathy, a 40-year-old returning student, came into my office a few weeks ago, she described her problem with language this way. In order to use language in the way she knows her teachers want her to, she explained, she must consciously will

herself to move from the place of her heart to the place of her brain. The difficulty arises, she said, because her grandmother, a great healer and mystic, taught Kathy from the time that she was a little girl to travel into trees and rocks, to go into the earth--in essence, to operate beyond language. For Kathy, the primarily oral nature of the Hawaiian tradition makes writing things down inherently suspect. For a student like Kathy, the fact that experience is perceived as being at all times beyond the reach of expression in words makes writing even a story or a poem a very difficult task.

In the ways I've noted, the traditional structure of the creative writing workshop where people sit around and criticize the way language is used is experienced by some local students as a dishonest way of interacting with a story whose form is secondary to the message being delivered. And to add to this problem, it also became clear to me that the communication patterns in the creative writing workshop are often skewed. When students from various cultures try to negotiate how to speak about the writing they are addressing, they sometimes fail in their oral exchanges. For example, local students do not like to interrupt other students and so speak much less frequently. When they do speak, they tend to pause for longer periods than their classmates and so are often interrupted. Some of the students do not look up when speaking and so talk while looking at their desks. These behaviors, according to Ron and Suzanne Scollon, exist because different ethnic groups place different values on interpersonal relationships and systems (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). The Scollons divide discourse study

into the following areas, and I would like show as I list these areas how each helps to explain some of the difficulty I notice students having in the multicultural creative writing workshop.

1. The first area demonstrates how speakers view the presentation of self and how cultural differences in such a presentation of self leads to miscommunication.

I have noticed that students from Micronesia, for example, watch and look until they get to know a situation, while other students tend to speak in order to get to know each other. A second related problem is that many students have been taught, as a sign of respect, to listen while the teacher talks. To do otherwise is to show a lack of respect.

2. The second area the Scollons looked at was the distribution of talk. This includes who speaks first, who controls the topic, and how turns at speaking are exchanged.

In the workshop setting, I have noticed that the Hawaiian students rarely speak first about a piece of writing. They often wait until everyone else has spoken before they give their opinion. When they do want to speak, it is often very difficult for them to get the floor, and if someone begins speaking about the poem or the story when they have just begun to speak, they will nearly always yield to the other speaker. It is often difficult for the Anglo students to know when the local student has finished speaking because they

tend to use much longer pauses than the Anglo students are used to. This leads to many starts and stops, apparent interruptions, opening the mouth but not getting in fast enough. I have noticed that the rhythms of talk distribution are so different in my creative writing classroom that a fair amount of class time is spent negotiating who is interrupting whom. There is a lot of "You go...." " No, you go ahead."

3 The third area that describes how communicative patterns are different in these two groups is an exploration of how talk actually makes sense to the various speakers and listeners in the multicultural classroom. This category focuses on information structuring--how often and how long pauses are used, explicit and implicit meaning attributed to what is said and the way the talk is organized.

Last week, one of the local students in my creative writing class actually turned to the woman next to him who had been speaking for a long time but who seemed to be finished and said to her, "I'm sorry, but I don't know if you're finished." She looked perplexed for a moment, but then understood that he wanted to speak and assured him that she was finished. Sometimes there appears to be a lack of syncrony with each other when students are trying to determine the meaning of a certain piece of writing. There is much eyebrow furrowing or feet shuffling because the local speaker seems to be speaking at too great a length for the Anglo speaker who desperately wants to say something but doesn't dare break in. The

Anglo speaker is not sure whether certain pauses denote that the speaker has finished or is just pausing and preparing to go on.

Defining these communication problems in the creative writing workshop underscores the fact that the workshop is a system where writing is often simply a focal point for other system-wide issues. Where the focus in creative writing workshops generally tends to be on what is being said and how it is being said, if we look at the communicative processes at work in the multicultural workshop, we notice that why something is being said is equally important (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). It is this question of what is being said versus why it is being said that leads me to the second point I want to explore today--the difficulty I have experienced in defining what counts or does not count as creative writing.

I have found that the language of many local students is infused with metaphor, local language, and poetry. I have noticed that the primarily oral stucture of the creole that many students grow up speaking appears to lend a lyrical quality to much of the students' writing. Thus the language of their papers is alive, beautiful, and the success of these papers, it seems to me, is one of a rich voice combined with a deep sense of the purpose and structure of narrative. Yet this very richness sometimes makes it difficult as a reader to know whether a given piece of writing counts as creative writing or as expository writing.

I'd like to share with you here a couple of examples of what I would call a creative writing response to an expository writing assignment. The first piece of student writing comes from an

assignment that asked the writer to describe something mundane and then draw conclusions from that description:

"Bodies upon bodies intertwine into one space. Not all has gathered here for the same purpose. Each mind has its own reason, its own logic and its own desires. As I enter the same room adding to the tension silently, I wonder if my wants and desires are as strong and powerful as those who stand around me. I question my ability to englihten the men and women on the committee. Doubt sets in, panic creeps up, and I begin to lose my nerve. I want to turn back."

The next piece of student writing comes from an assignment that asked the writer to describe what the word "local" meant to him:

"When I ask myself what is one local, I tink of all da varieties of people dat blend togeda in Hawaii. Da most impotant ting is da aloha spirit! Da "Braddah-braddah kine" attitude, 'as not just one Hawaiian ting, 'as one "local" ting! Living in Hawaii fo all dese years, you no really notice 'em, but wen you go mainland and see how da people ak (act), den you start fo miss da Hawaii people!"

The same week that I received these two samples, I found tacked to my door a piece for the creative writing class that had been written by Kathy, the woman whose grandmother had taught her in silence. She wrote this, a piece I would normally call non-fiction that began like this:

"How has this woman affected me? I feel extremely fortunate to have been exposed to a Hawaiian matriarch system in the 1900s. My strength stems from this peaceful powerful woman and she was not after money or recognition. Christianity had a negative impact on her beliefs, and by going underground, aided in the preservation of her holistic healings and values...."

Looking at these three pieces of writing, I wondered if my colleagues and my students also had the same sense that I had that the line between what we call creative writing and what we call expository writing is not as clear or as neat as we sometimes like to make it. It seemed to me more important not to make assumptions, but rather to try and create definition here. In order to find out how other people were thinking about this issue, I decided to do a pilot study in which I had the members of my English department, the students in my creative writing class, and the students in my advanced composition class respond to the following questions:

1. What are some kinds of writing you've done yourself or assigned (been assigned) that you would call creative writing?

2. What kinds of assignments do you give (have you been given) that you'd call expository writing?

3. Can you describe what makes a piece of writing expository rather than creative?

4. Can you think of a metaphor that would illustrate the difference between expository and creative writing?

After the questionnaires were filled out, I interviewed two students and two faculty members to see if I could more clearly define the difference between creative and expository writing.

What I discovered from the questionnaires is, in many ways, not surprising. The faculty members (none of whom, by the way, teach creative writing) made general comments like "Writing is a messy business," but then went on to define what many of them thought were the distinctions between the two kinds of writing. Expository writing, said the faculty, "serves public conventions and realities," "Makes a point and attempts to support it in some way," "is clear as to audience and purpose." The faculty members defined creative writing as writing "filled with wonder," "writing that manipulates voice, focuses on a character, and experiments with techniques," "writing where the writer is free, not bound by the conventions of academic expository writing," and "creates an experience for the reader." One faculty member did say that all writing is creative writing, and that making a distinction is an error.

The students were less genteel in their definitions. They said that expository writing is "a duty," is "boring talk," is "writing that plays by someone else's rules," "exists to answer a question in such a way as to communicate to the instructor that I learned something," " is done with the intention of impressing someone rather than expressing something." When they defined

creative writing, the students called it spontaneous, writing coming from the imagination, pleasurable, intuitive, having no solid rules, giving the writer a lens to look at life and, perhaps most importantly, requires no footnotes and no MLA handbook.

When I asked if faculty or students could find a metaphor to illustrate the difference between expository and creative writing, the faculty members came up empty. But the students made lists and lists of metaphors that they thought distinguished the two kinds of writing. "Expository writing," wrote one student, "is like shoveling snow to clear a walkway. Creative writing is pissing on the snow to leave your name." Another student commented that "expository writing is going to the dentist to get my teeth cleaned, whereas creative writing is taking a walk in the garden whenever I want."

Other metaphors the students used called expository writing like open plains and creative writing like caves, expository writing like gods and creative writing like goddesses, expository writing a lawnmower and creative writing a scythe, expository writing a reasoned conversation and creative writing a dream. One student insisted that the distinction between the two types of writing was no less than an issue of truthtelling. "The term paper is biased, no matter what anyone says, but creative writing is simply experience and therefore true."

What do these questions about what counts as creative or expository writing and how students interact in the writing workshop tell us about how we will want to teach the creative writing workshop in the future? It seems to me that the lessons

here are powerful--as our classrooms become more culturally diverse, we can no longer make assumptions about what is being said, what is being heard, and what is being written. Such an inability to make assumptions means that we must continue to ask questions--of ourselves, of our students, of our colleagues--and to talk to each other so that we might create a forum where we can discover together what defines the creative writing classroom of 1the 21st century.

Scollon, R. and Scollon, S. (1981) Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp.